The Significance of Procedures of Ethnography and Narrative Analysis for the (Self-)Reflection of Professional Work

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1. Introduction

Social scientists working in the fields of biographical research, interaction analysis and other interpretative approaches are expected – and often expect it of themselves – to contribute to the reflection and self-reflection of professional work and to the development of forms of professional intervention.[2] There is hope, (a) to develop more refined instruments of analysis in order to learn about the meaning and consequences of professional work for the life histories and life circumstances of patients and clients, and (b) to use such procedures as resources in the professional work as such. Doing a survey on "the discourse of biographical research" should also include thinking aloud about practical contexts of applying and acquiring such procedures.

There has been a large number of German and international publications about the uses of the contemporary biographical research in the social sciences and other interpretative approaches for educational settings in the professions, for reflecting about one's own professional practice and the practice of others, and for the further development of forms of intervention.[3] The affinities between case analyses in the social sciences and in professional practice have been spelled out. Approaches of interpretative social research have become more and more important in social work, but also in teacher

1 This article is a translation of a German piece ("Zur Bedeutung ethnographischer und erzählanalytischer Arbeitsweisen für die (Selbst-)Reflexion professioneller Arbeit. Ein Erfahrungsbericht") which was published in Bettina Völter, Bettina Dausien, Helma Lutz and Gabriele Rosenthal (eds.) (2005): Biographieforschung im Diskurs. Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, pp. 248-270. I have included a few new references. – I wish to thank Bettina Dausien and Bettina Völter for helpful comments on an earlier version of this paper.

2 This is reflected in the great interest in the annual conference of the section on Biographical Research of the German Sociological Association in 2002, which was held at the Department of Social Work of the University of Bamberg (entitled: "The analysis, (self-)reflection and composition of professional work. The contribution of biographical research and other interpretative approaches"). See also Dausien/Hanses/Inowlocki/Rie-mann (2008).

3 Cf., e.g., Chamberlayne/Bornat/Apitzsch, 2004; Fischer, 2004; Hanses, 2004; Riemann 2002, 2003a, 2003c, 2005, 2006; Schütze 1994; Jakob/von Wensierski, 1997; and Völter, 2008.

training, research on classroom interaction and school development (Breidenstein et al., 2002), and in the self-reflection of psychotherapists (Frommer/Rennie, 2001).

I will not present a review of this development, but would like to use my own experience of working with students of social work[4] to ponder over the creation of conditions under which future professionals could turn into interpretative social researchers of their own affairs (Riemann 2006) and acquire analytical competencies which are basic to practical case analyses in working with clients – analyses, which always have to take into account the strong pressure to act and take quick decisions. I will turn to modes of practice which have proved useful in my own teaching of research skills. By slightly modifying the title of a book edited by Stefan Hirschauer and Klaus Amman (1997), I have started to call this endeavor "making one's own practice strange" (Riemann, 2004).

2. An Episode[5]

While I was still working at the department of social work of the University of Kassel, a student of social work looked me up, since she needed an advisor for one of her two obligatory research papers (in her undergraduate course of social work). She told me that she had already asked quite a few staff members to consider supervising her project, but all of them had declared themselves "not in charge" of the topic which she had contemplated: "causes of alcoholism". I told her that I did not exactly consider at myself an expert in this domain, but asked her how she had developed an interest in this topic. She told me that she had lived on a Native American reservation in the Southwest of the U.S. before she started studying social work and that some of her Native American friends had suffered from major drinking problems. This had made her feel helpless. I still remember that I was quite surprised but also curious, and asked her whether she would like to turn her memories of the reservation into a topic for her research paper: the way she had approached a culture and way of life entirely unfamiliar and strange to her, and how she had encountered obstacles in trying to understand all of this. I mentioned that this could provide a background for focusing on the issue of how she had tried to understand the problematic history and situation of her friends. I told her that I could supervise such a project even though I was not

4 I worked at the department of social work of the University of Kassel from 1983 until 1997 and at the department of social work of the University of Bamberg from 1997 until 2007 (before starting to work at the Georg-Simon-Ohm University of Applied Sciences in Nuremberg). – This article was still written in Bamberg.

5 I already dealt with this episode in an earlier publication (Riemann 1999).

an expert in the field of "Native American Studies". I could offer to support her in reconstructing her memories and observations, and in developing research questions (similar to the way in which I dealt with students in general, who had undergone experience "strange" to me and of which I had no understanding, yet).

The student was surprised that someone whom she had met at university was interested in her experience on the reservation, but she was also irritated; since she could not imagine that spontaneously documenting and reflecting about personal experience could have a legitimate place in a research paper which had to meet "scientific" requirements after all. We agreed that she should think about it, and that she could contact me any time. Afterwards we ran into each other once in a while and exchanged a few friendly words. The research paper I had suggested was never written – at least not under my guidance.

That was fine with me – it would have been wrong to push the student in this regard. However, this episode demonstrates something problematic if you look at the student's quest, and the topic which she had formulated in the beginning. The social work course at the University of Kassel includes elements of reflecting personal experience in different phases: (self-awareness groups at the beginning of the course, seminars during and after work placements, and even regular meetings with a "supervisor", i.e. a counselor helping professionals to understand their practice problems and experience and their personal involvement in their work. But I am also under the impression that educational milieus in social work (irrespective of their placement in a traditional university or a university of applied sciences) are marked by a tendency to disregard and discount students' biographical experience as resources for social research into their own affairs. There are not enough social arrangements of teaching and learning in which students are encouraged and accompanied to discover puzzles that originate in their own earlier experience and in non-academic contexts, to reflect about them, to find research objectives in these processes and to learn about themselves. Of course, I do not want to make a case for blurring the borders of research and (therapeutically etc. informed) processes of creating self-awareness; that would be a misunderstanding.

A reader might object, "So what? Isn't the student's query about the 'causes of alcoholism' such a question which had originated during her time on the Native American reservation? Everything would have been okay if she had met a professor who had claimed alcoholism or drug addiction as her or his expert domain." But this is exactly the problem: The student had formulated her interest in a "de-indexicalized" (cf. Garfinkel 1967 on the concept of indexicality) and abstract way, and thereby demonstrated her notion of "being scientific". She apparently assumed that such a reformulation was necessary in order to awaken the interest of a staff member, while the rele-

vant context of experience was opaque in the eyes of her interaction partners. Of course, it makes sense for students of social work to study theories of addiction. But if a member of the teaching staff had merely given her or his blessing to the topic the student had presented, it would have meant that she had just deductively applied theories to the social and cultural contexts, in which her puzzle – "what's the matter with my friends?" – had emerged. Such a top-down logic of subsumption would have meant to understand less (and not more) about her friends in difficult life situations: members of an indigenous minority in the U.S., whose history is marked by a collective experience of marginalization and demoralization. Their primary and decontextualized identification and isolation as members of the worldwide category of "alcoholics" would have been misleading.

I have frequently observed that students of social work cloak the things which occupy their minds – things which are valuable to them, but maybe also especially burdensome and depressing – by allegedly scientific sounding formulations. Such a tendency has problematic consequences for all parties involved: not just for the students who learn that "this" is no place where they may present and ponder over "their own" questions, but also for the departments and schools in general which forgo the discovery of new research problems. I have the impression that such tendencies are facilitated by the current macro conditions of academic education in Germany with the implementation of the so-called Bologna process: the introduction of "staccatos" of exams in the context of modularized courses which are meant to guarantee a greater effectiveness and a speedy training.

It seems to me that there are special opportunities for social work research processes if students are encouraged to articulate their own experience - biographical experience from times prior to their enrolment into university (as in the example mentioned above) as well as during the time of their work placements. Students can become active as researchers of their own affairs and can discover that acquiring skills of reconstructive social research is in their own best interest in order to work in a way which is in accordance with their own professional aspirations. Thereby it is possible for them to learn at first hand that personal experience is accessible to social scientific analysis. But such opportunities are not systematically used in traditional academic training. E.g., in educational science "a majority (of those students who are enrolled into a course or have finished it, G.R.) look at the work placement as an isolated element of their training." (Schulze-Krüdener/Homfeldt, 2002: 135).[6]

[6] It should be kept in mind that recent developments in biographical research and studies of professional work have also been stimulated by the research contributions of students, e.g., Schütze's work on paradoxes of professional work (Schütze, 1992; 1996; 2000).

3. Forms of Approaching One's Practice and of Making it Strange

Some settings have proved useful in my own teaching of research skills – settings in which students are drawn into qualitative research processes by creating a link to their own experience of professional practice. I have in mind supervising research papers in the early phase of their course (Riemann, 1999)[7]; ethnographic analyses of practice in the context of their work placements, i.e., seminars for "making one's own practice strange" and for discovering work processes and central problems of professional work in certain fields of practice (Riemann, 2004); and research workshops in which students are accompanied whilst working on their own empirical theses for qualifying exams (Riemann/Schütze, 1987; Reim/Riemann, 1997; Riemann 2003b).

I would like to focus on two types of work which have proved useful in the context of self-reflexive ethnographic seminars of practice analysis and which complement each other: the production of ethnographic field notes during work placements and their analysis and the social scientific analysis of narratives as developed on the basis of narrative interviews (Schütze, 1987; 2007 a, b). The development of the working style which will be outlined in this paper has especially been influenced by my collaboration with Fritz Schütze at the department of social work of the University of Kassel[8], and by the investigations of work which were carried out by Anselm Strauss and his co-workers; studies which are also marked by a reflection of the authors' own experience of work and illness (cf. Strauss et al. 1998, 294-295p.; Corbin/Strauss 1988) – something which Strauss calls "experiential data" (Strauss 1987, p.10-13). When looking at the history and the features of his monographs on medical work, and the interaction with dying people and chronically ill patients, it is noticeable that the authors' and research workers' style of generating new insights was facilitated by a continuous dialogue: an interplay between the articulation of experience of practice and fieldwork on the one hand and procedures of abstraction and gaining distance

7 It is important to create conditions under which students can talk about experience from times before entering university, in order to develop potential research problems in this way. Such studies are produced in small groups, i.e., students have to discover among themselves and in cooperation with the instructor which research problems are intriguing for them, but can also be investigated in the light of their competencies and the time which they can afford. The research problems belong to the spectrum of qualitative studies in which different kinds of social processes are analyzed - as distinguished from quantitative studies about research problems which are shaped by theorizing about distributions.

8 Schütze's (1994) reflections on the importance of an ethnographic orientation for social work practice and education were informed by his work as mentor of social work students during their work placements.

(generating questions, open coding, contrastive comparisons) on the other (Strauss, 1987: 130-142). This is especially impressive in the case history on the work with a dying patient - "Anguish" (Strauss/Glaser, 1970) – which is mainly based on an extensive interview with two students of nursing during their work placements, one of them Shizuko Fagerhaugh, Strauss's later co-author. It is significant that Strauss's most important research collaborators during the last decades of his life were professionally experienced and sociologically trained nurses[9].

3.1 Working with Ethnographic Field Notes

I have supervised the work of students with ethnographic field notes, (a) in seminars in which they present and share their work experience during their fourth and fifth semester of undergraduate training which they spend on work placements, and (b) in the context of a major field of study ("social work with mentally ill persons and drug addicts") which I have coordinated with a colleague who is a medical doctor[10], and which students can choose after their return from their two semesters of continuous work placements. A feature of this field of study is that students spend some time on a shorter work placement again, either a few weeks during the semester break or for a few hours per week during a longer time span.

In order to illustrate the ethnographic work with these students, I will use an example from a seminar for students during their fourth and fifth semester which they spend on work placements. This type of work is very similar to

9 There are also points of contact with the "studies of work" which were initiated by Harold Garfinkel (Sharrock/Anderson, 1986: 80-98; Pollner/Emerson, 2001), even though I do not agree with Garfinkel's demand that the researcher is supposed to master fully the work practices which are being investigated by her or him (something which he refers to as the "unique adequacy requirement"). As can be noted below, I regard the liminal situation of the novice or trainee, who is very serious in acquiring skills in a certain field of practice but is not fully competent yet and not blinded by routine, as a very good precondition for discovering something new. Pollner and Emerson (2001: 123) write about the context of the "unique adequacy requirement" within ethnomethodology (EM): "From early on in its development one current within EM has emphasized active participation and the acquisition of indigenous skills and knowledge as means of capturing the lived order (…). Such practices have taken on even more prominence as EM has refocused from studying the diffuse competencies and practices implicated in 'everyday' interaction to examining technical or otherwise esoteric settings. Instead of 'making the familiar strange' by developing 'amnesia for common sense' (Garfinkel 1967), then, the ethnomethodologist is exhorted to acquire familiarity with opaque background knowledge and practices. For EM views these specialized settings as self-organizing ensembles of local practices whose ways and workings are only accessible through a competent practitioner's in-depth experience and familiarity. Thus, identification of the distinctive features of shamanism or mathematics requires the capacity for competent performance and actual participation in the form of life under consideration."

10 I refer to Professor Dr. Jörg Wolstein.

the work in the major field of study – except for the fact of the heterogeneous composition of the seminar: Students work in very different fields of practice, not just in the field of mental health and drug addiction.

I will use excerpts from the field protocol of a trainee in which he wrote down memories of a so called "first session" which he had observed in a family counseling centre of a large church-affiliated German welfare association.[11] The student spent two semesters (or 40 weeks) in this counseling centre. The student participants of the seminar and I could discover on the basis of the rather detailed sequential protocol, which took into account the stages and the central activities of this action scheme of counseling, how the professional in charge of this "first session", a psychologist, failed to establish a relationship of trust with the clients, a married couple from Poland whose right to custody of their daughter Agnieszka had been revoked. Even though the student was not aware of this feature of the interaction while writing down his field notes, it was possible to discover it in retrospect. The psychologist's failure in this regard is particularly noticeable in the way in which he adopts the viewpoint of the youth welfare office and the court and in which he doubts the version of Agnieszka's father, i.e., he accepts the established "hierarchy of credibility" (as Howard Becker (1967) calls it) as given and reaffirms it.

At some point the student had written down: *"Mr. Olschewski wants to have his 'stolen' daughter back and asks who is Mrs. Seifert anyway (the family judge responsible for this case) who does not know Agnieszka at all but may take his daughter away from him."* The student had added a retrospective commentary in which he had referred to the court proceedings led by a female judge; he and the psychologist had received an impression of these proceedings because Mr. Olschewski had shown them the court order. He comments in retrospect: *"I think that the constellation with exclusively female office-holders is difficult for an eastern European male with regard to the acceptance of authority. The behavior of Mr. Olschewski before the court (uncooperative and aggressive) becomes more understandable if you take this into account."*

I still have vivid memories of the seminar discussion in which we consensually focused on the stereotypical quality of his comment on an "eastern European male" as a stranger (at this point a totally different category of a stranger could have appeared) – to say nothing of the fact that the student writer had not been present at the court proceedings and could therefore only state how the father's behavior had been evaluated by others: as *"uncooperative and aggressive"*. The student took an active part in the discussion without having to wear sackcloth and ashes. This shows that such a protocol can also be helpful for reflecting and questioning one's own routine typifications and ethnic categorizations. At the same time, the text turned out to be rich in

11 Readers will find an extensive discussion of this field protocol in Riemann (2006).

gaining general insights into the order of an action scheme of counseling and the conditions under which it failed and in initiating a discourse about mistakes in professional work. The style of such a joint production of new insights in the seminar discussion is marked by research communication in the style of research workshops and a discourse on professional mistakes. Carefully criticizing the practice, and searching for possible alternatives of action become constitutive parts of the analysis. The student trainees/field researchers are not expected to deliver elaborate and sophisticated protocols or to endure a tribunal if they fail to meet such standards.

When students of social work are expected to write down their personal experience of practice, they are often skeptical and irritated and express their reservations about the supposedly "unscientific" quality of personal field notes. Sometimes they feel that social science is something abstract, formidable and totally divorced from their own experience – something which does not have anything to do with them as future down-to-earth practitioners. They think what counts is the "fragmentary" reception and storage of research results for all practical purposes – in contrast with a deeper socialization into research procedures which might enable (future) practitioners to take part in an egalitarian discourse of social scientists and to make their own contributions to research. Oftentimes, they are convinced that using the first person of the personal pronoun (which is a necessary part of personal field notes) has no legitimate place in social science writings. Overcoming such doubts and reservations – "that's just subjective" – can be cumbersome and may require a lot of time. The instructor's request to make a field of practice strange might also be experienced as an excessive and irritating demand, since it is a field of practice in which students want to acquire the necessary practical competencies and appropriate language skills and want to be accepted as trustworthy members. It is not easy to register the things which are regarded as a "matter of course", the typifications and practical theories of a field of practice, in which students want to prove themselves as future professional practitioners, as remarkable and noteworthy phenomena, to describe them and to bracket their "natural" validity.

The student ethnographers only lose their insecurity when they start to make observations and write down their field notes ("learning by doing"), when they make their texts accessible to others (including the instructor) and when they receive personal feedback on their notes (on what strikes readers as especially interesting or what appears opaque). But it also makes sense to inform them about some elements of writing which have proved useful in writing ethnographic field notes in this context[12]. Students are advised:

12 The details, conventions and traditions which are important for the production of ethnographic fieldnotes have only become a topic in cultural anthropology in the last two decades (Sanjek, 1990). In the sociological literature on field research especially the work by Emerson et al. (1995) contains useful suggestions for writing fieldnotes.

- to write for an audience whom they assume not familiar with the procedures and social contexts of the relevant field of practice, and to present their observations in such a way that it is possible for outside readers to analyze the text by themselves;
- to acquire systematically an attitude of wondering and of not taking anything for granted;
- to focus on sequences for the sake of discovering the order, but also the disorder of social processes. The disorder could consist in the violation of interactional reciprocity and in breaches and irritations of sequences of action and communication;
- to take into account and to differentiate between their own inner states and perspectives at different times (as actors in the former situation and later on when writing down and reflecting on their observations);
- to differentiate among the perspectives of different actors and to forgo the tendency to privilege certain, e.g., official and prestigious, perspectives;
- to differentiate the language of the field from their own observational language.

A few words about the style of communication which has developed in our seminars of practice analysis (cf. Riemann, 2005: 95-97). Participants take turns in presenting their field notes which are then discussed and analyzed – field notes which clearly focus on certain events: e.g., the first encounter with the field of practice; professional schemes of action like counseling sessions, therapies, intake interviews, clinical rounds and team meetings; the history of the relationship with a client; recurring everyday routines in an institution etc. The participants in the seminar take time to work on the (anonymized) field notes at home (having received an electronic version in time) and in the seminar, i.e., they segment them and comment on them. Discussing the whole text and partial sequences involves focusing on stylistic and linguistic particularities, social processes, contexts, conditions, central professional problems and paradoxes (Schütze, 1992; 1996) and problematic tendencies of coping with them, which have become visible in the data.

The joint microscopic work on certain sequences can primarily be understood as "open coding" as described by Anselm Strauss (1987: 28). Participants focus on

(1) discovering the structure of social processes, the perspectives of different interaction partners, the central problems of professional work and the ways of coping with them;
(2) identifying the experience and interpretations of the fellow student who had distributed her data (experience and interpretations during the depicted events and at the time of the writing); and

(3) formulating elements of a non-normative criticism of the observed practice (Riemann, 2002), be it the practice of the student writer or the practice of other interaction partners who appear in the field notes, and on suggesting possible alternatives of action.

As mentioned above, in this case, engaging in criticism is a constitutive part of the analysis – in contrast to a traditional ethnographic attitude and also in contrast to the concept of "ethnomethodological indifference" (Garfinkel, 1970)[13]. It is always important to present a critique in a case specific way and by taking into account the relevant problems of action. This also means that generalizing depreciations and premature ascriptions of general levels of competence, "deficits of professionalism" and other "essential" negative properties should be avoided. Starting points of criticism develop in the context of an empirical discovery of breaches in the base of reciprocity and cooperation and of irritations of the sequential order of the observed processes of interaction, communication, action, and work[14]. The critique should be formulated in such a way that the addressee could regard it as a respectful offer for a dialogue – regardless of whether he or she is exposed to it or not.

The student who has shared her or his material makes a written summary on the basis of the (primarily oral) feedback of the other participants in the seminar. This summary serves as the basis for her/his further work on the field notes. The participants of the seminar support each other during the process of the gradual production of their ethnographic final reports, i.e., they discuss outlines and excerpts of their reports and examine whether the composition of the work in progress does justice to the specifics of the experience of the respective student ethnographers, and whether or not the things which are especially interesting in the data are sufficiently explored.

Types of ethnographic work have spread widely in the last two decades and have become more differentiated (Atkinson et al. (eds.), 2001). Writing ethnographic field notes still plays an important role although many ethnographic studies are characterized by quite diverse data and utilize new procedures of recording (video and film). At the same time some social scientists

13 Pollner and Emerson explain the concept of „ethnomethodological indifference" as follows: "In general, EM indifference bids the researcher to refrain from assessing correctness, appropriateness or adequacy in articulating the practices and organization of the endogenous order. Whatever faults (or virtues) they may display when assessed by extrinsic criteria, these practices and their products constitute the social reality of everyday activities – in the home, office, clinic and scientific laboratory (……). Thus, ethnomethodological indifference precludes characterizations of members as deficient, pathological or irrational (or superior, normal or rational). Of course, such characterizations are of interest as phenomena when they occur in the setting under consideration: critique and fault-finding are ubiquitous features of social life and thus comprise activities whose organization, use and consequences are to be explicated."

14 I wish to thank Fritz Schütze for drawing my attention to the implicit criteria underlying my critical analysis of professional work.

criticize the use of field notes as outdated and refer to unavoidable problems of analysis. Ulrich Oevermann, e.g., criticizes "the circular convolution of collecting and analyzing data" (2001: 85).

Of course, such selective and retrospectively produced field notes cannot be equated with transcriptions of audio recordings which lend themselves to exact and intersubjectively controllable analyses of texts (analyses of interactions, narrative analyses), but other insights are possible which cannot be gained on the basis of transcriptions, e.g., insights into former and later inner states of the student writer/trainee and the changes of his or her identity and world view (if a series of field notes is arranged and read sequentially according to the days on which they were written). It is important that different schemes of communication (Kallmeyer/Schütze, 1977) – narration, description, and argumentation – can be distinguished when single oral or written texts are analyzed and that no impenetrable mixture develops which complicates an analysis or makes it impossible. Fritz Schütze (1987: 256) has coined the term "schema salad" in this regard.

In our seminars of practice analysis, written field notes are never taken at face value in a naïve way, but they are critically scrutinized: Is there a certain lack of plausibility in the reconstruction of events and experience? What about the observational foci, the categories, interpretations, evaluations and blind spots of the student writer? It is important that this happens in a style which is not debunking and malicious. Because these texts disclose so much about the student writer as a future professional, they are an important basis for understanding and reflecting processes of professional socialization in general.

3.2 Looking Back – Narrating One's Own Practice

I just dealt with a way of approaching a field of practice and one's own practice in a disciplined but also personal way. This approach implies writing field notes *shortly after* the events which one has witnessed and in which one participated and making part of this material accessible to other student ethnographers with whom one tries to accomplish some analytical distance in order to learn even more about the observed reality and about oneself. If everything goes well, the student writers / trainees are still under the impression of what they experienced a short time ago. Maybe they had the chance to scribble down keywords or quotes in between – terms and utterances which might help them to bring back the memory of scenes and situations when they write down their protocol in the evening. Emerson et al. (1995: 31-35) refer to "jottings" as "mnemonic devices" (cf. Clifford, 1990: 51). Thereby it becomes possible to create dense descriptive texts which include many details on recurring and nonrecurring sequences of conversation, scenes and situations including paralinguistic and nonverbal components. It

is important to stay sensitive to sequences: how did one event lead to the next? Sometimes it is surprising to see that the development of events can be reconstructed in a very detailed manner if one assumes such an attitude of staying sensitive to sequence. The process of writing leads to new insights and ideas, too.

There is quite another way of visualizing one's practice and of "making it strange" in retrospect: One can tell an off-the-cuff narrative about it – especially after the completion of the work placement. I have started to recommend to students at the beginning of our seminar on practice analysis that they tell each other about the history of their work placement: how it came about, how they experienced it, how it ended and how they look back at it. At the beginning of the seminar most of them have finished their work placement.

In other words, I suggest that the students conduct narrative interviews in their group – narrative interviews on the history of interactions and work relationships as they were applied in studies of professional work in the last years (Riemann, 2000:40-43; Reim, 1995), but this time not primarily on the history which one shares with a client or a client family[15], but on the personal history of the entire work placement. Of course, the relationship with individual clients can become very important in this context. If it turns out that there are certain parts of the experience of a work placement which students want to get off their chests - this might be the history which one shares with a client (see below) –, this should be at the centre of the narrative.

In the past, I have supervised a number of empirical studies, e.g., in my student research workshop, in which students collected narrative interviews on interaction histories of professionals and clients. This material was very rich in shedding light on sequences of work, the central problems of professional work and the sometimes problematic ways in which they were handled. This is different from what I am focusing on here: students are encouraged to *tell their own stories* und to develop some analytical distance (together with their listeners) from their experience which is expressed in their narratives. It is possible that many new insights emerge in off-the-cuff story telling (Schütze, 1987; 2007 a, b), think of the diverse argumentative (reflective and evaluative) commentaries which are embedded in narratives.

Attentive listeners might touch upon an experience difficult for the narrator – an experience which he or she might just have alluded to or which might have left their imprint in symptomatic textual indicators – and to un-

15 This question is different from asking for a „case" as I explained in my study on the practice of social workers in a family counselling centre (Riemann, 2000: 41-42): "When I asked, 'Just tell me about your history with Mrs. X. How did everything come about?', I tried to initiate a very personal narrative in which the former and present inner states of the narrator and the ups and downs of her case work would become visible and would not be polished up. That means: I discouraged a smoothened and impersonal expert presentation of a 'case' and of herself. I would have probably invited such a presentation if I had asked, 'Tell me the case of Mrs. X.'"

tangle things together with her or him. (This happens in the questioning part of the interview which follows the introductory narrative.) If the interview is transcribed, the discursive analysis can be pushed even further into the setting of a research workshop in which the narrator participates. However, this requires a special interest on behalf of the narrator (and former trainee) and a milieu in which the participants are already familiar with the procedures and possibilities of narrative analyses. I do not have in mind such an advanced and methodically controlled narrative analysis in the case of a seminar in which students come together, who share their experience of work placements. I just think it is worthwhile that students gain a special access to their practice – the phases and gestalt of their experience in general – and hit upon problems which they formerly found too difficult to articulate (orally and in their field notes). Analyzing field notes and "listening to oneself" can complement each other in order to explore what was especially interesting during the work placement and in this specific site of the social world.

I would like to convey the impression of the off-the-cuff narrative of a student of social work at the centre of which is a difficult experience during his past work placement (lasting two semesters) – an experience the student still found difficult to articulate at the time of the interview. The context of this narrative is somewhat different from the seminars of practice analysis which I have dealt with in my article, but this does not matter so much since I want to focus on particularities of the data.

This student approached me because he wanted to write his diploma thesis (final undergraduate thesis) under my supervision. When we talked about what might be an interesting topic for him, he referred to his work placement (during his fourth and fifth semester) in a small residential home for youths who did not live with their families anymore. I had not been his mentor during his work placement, so I did not know anything about it. One of the youths, an adolescent named Vincent, was regarded as "manic depressive" (the other youths had not been psychiatrically classified) and the student mentioned that he still thought a lot about his difficult relationship with Vincent. Therefore, he had developed an interest in writing a thesis about "social work with manic depressive youths".

I suggested he should tell the story of his relationship with this youth in a narrative interview and that a friend of his, a female student of social work who did not know much about his work placement, could be the interviewer. Both students agreed. The interview was audio recorded and transcribed and we spent a few hours in our student research workshop to look at the story and to learn about interesting phenomena in the events and experience which were recollected in the narrative. (The interviewee and the interviewer were present.) This data became a central resource in the student's diploma thesis about social work with youths who had been diagnosed as "manic-depressive". Formal textual phenomena became very important in the analy-

sis, since they ensured access to deeper and painful experience of the narrator/author on the one hand, and central problems of professional work in this field of practice on the other. By taking into account and stressing such general features, it became also possible to create an atmosphere in which the student did not slide into a kind of chaotic self-absorption or self-accusation. It was important to keep in mind that the student's entanglements also revealed central problems or paradoxes of professional work in general which are difficult to cope with.

A few remarks on the context of the excerpt which will be presented below: After the interviewer had asked the interviewee, *"Yeah, just tell me the story with Vincent"*, a very lively, detailed and often humorous narrative develops. It becomes obvious that the student got to know the youth very well, that they were on friendly terms and that he felt close to him. While working with him he was also critical of a co-worker whom he regarded as not sufficiently sensitive. He felt that his colleague had contributed to the youth's destabilization by reifying ascriptions and unfounded prognoses, i.e., that he had initiated a process of self-fulfilling prophecies.

At one point, the narrator reaches a decisive turn of events: the circumstances of Vincent's psychiatric hospitalization and his own involvement in these events. He tells about events during one night, when he was on duty and tried in vain to send Vincent to bed. (At that point the team was already convinced that the youth was sliding into a *"manic phase"*.) The student narrator remembers that the youth stayed awake and *"was pottering around in the kitchen"*. He wants to start narrating how he had informed his team colleagues about these events during the next morning and how the team had decided to arrange Vincent's mental hospitalization, but he interrupts himself at this point when he notices that he has to add some background information in order to make plausible how the story unfolded. That means, he corrects himself and inserts a lengthy and complex background construction in which another background construction (a background construction of the second degree) is embedded.[16]

The background construction reveals a central moral dilemma of the team and especially of the sensitive actor/narrator: they are helpless with regard to the continuous ups and downs of the youth's "manic" and "depres-

16 Cf. Schütze 1987, pp. 207-235; Schütze 2007a, b; Riemann 2000: 57-58 and 230-231, footnote 5, on the analytical relevance of background constructions in off-hand-narratives of self-lived experience. The detailed and comparative analysis of spontaneous narratives of self-lived experience has shown again and again that background constructions often refer to very difficult experiences, which might be chaotic, incomprehensible, traumatic or associated with feelings of guilt and shame. It is difficult to narrate about such experiences, since the narrator tends to fade them out of awareness, but then (time-displaced) background constructions about these experiences are still inserted into the main story line because of the constraints of story-telling. Background constructions are self-corrective devices in off-the-cuff story telling about personal experiences.

sive" phases and they do not know what to do without becoming guilty in their own eyes. In between the student/narrator suggested to stay with the youth during a "manic" phase and to *"sit it out"* with him in order to avoid a psychiatric hospitalization, but the others rejected this suggestion because this would be too risky for the youth who is very much overweight: *"No, we can't do that. This would go too far. He will break down and die."* At the same time the members of the team know that Vincent is very fearful of a psychiatric hospitalization (because of prior experience) and they have a lot of doubts if the high dosage of his medicine, and an increase of this dosage are not extremely risky, too. The narrator had witnessed how a doctor had formulated the prognosis that the youth would not grow older than forty years due to this kind of medication. .

After finishing the background construction the narrator returns to his main story line and starts the following sequence which marks the preliminary end of his narrative[17]:

N: Yeah, in any case, as I had told before there was this action of rattling pots in the kitchen.
Well, and then it was obvious, then / what happened: We had a team meeting the next day in which I told everything. And then it was decided, "Yeah, it cannot continue like this." There was the team leader, and in any case it resulted in, "Vincent has to be sent to the mental hospital." And he was taken to the mental hospital at noon. Somehow it was a very strange situation. The guy had / so he came home, he learned that he somehow had to go to the mental hospital, he started to cry very hard, he was totally devastated, he said good-bye to everybody, he wanted / he said good-bye to everybody, he hugged everybody, he approached everybody and hugged them. And with me / I went to him, he didn't approach me, I went to him, it was shaking hands cold as ice somehow.

I: Uhm

N: And then he was gone. But he had made me responsible somehow for the fact that he had to go to the mental hospital.

I: Uhm

N: It was difficult, it was difficult to deal with.

I: Uhm

N: It also had an effect on me for a long time. All right, I mean, I know for sure that I wasn't the cause. And, my God, if another worker had been on duty during that night the same thing would have happened. And then this worker would have been the fool. Or something like that.

I: Uhm

N: But, well, it fell on nobody else, it was me. And this was really hard to chew. It must have been on my mind for a week all the time. I was always thinking, "Vincent somehow, what is he thinking about me?" No idea. I really didn't manage / he was in psychiatry for a month / and I really didn't manage to visit him once, not even one time, really.

I: Uhm

N: It was really crazy. I even drove to C-town together with my girlfriend to go shopping.

17 "N" refers to the narrator, "I" to the interviewer.

And it wouldn't have been difficult at all to get away for an hour, and to visit him there. Or something like that. But then, I noticed in myself again / so when I now / when I think about it in retrospect somehow – the excuse: "I cannot leave her alone for an hour." I was looking for stupid excuses so that I didn't have to go to the mental hospital.

I: Uhm

N: And I also really don't know the reason. Maybe partially because of the conflict. On the other hand, I was just afraid to go to the mental hospital. I had heard stories / the others had visited him and / some of them, not everybody, and my practice teacher / for the five thousandth time: his care worker /

((The interviewer and the interviewee laugh.))

I had a very good relationship with him. And he told me a lot of things. And he also told me, "So Vincent, really heavy stuff, he was sent to the critical care unit, he was tied to his bed and so on," and many things like that. I don't know I was scared stiff to see him.

I: Uhm

N: Scared stiff. And I really think that this was the reason why I did not go there. I was scared stiff. It's crazy, it's really crazy because Vincent / he would have / I really think, my God, I think he really would have enjoyed my visit. A hundred percent. He would have enjoyed every visit. And I really didn't manage (to visit him), but as I said, I was scared stiff. ((a pause of five seconds)) It was difficult, really heavy. ((a pause of five seconds)) When I still think about it, it's still on my mind (and has an effect on me). Aehm, what else can I tell?

I: How did it go on?

(The interviewee picks up the story line again.)

A few final remarks on this sequence: The preliminary end of the student's narrative is characterized by a painful discussion of – what he defines as - his own moral failure. He has the impression that the youth had accused him nonverbally of being disloyal or that he has even betrayed him. This is still difficult to swallow. He still reproaches himself for not having been able to visit the youth when he was in the mental hospital. He still senses some perplexity about himself *("And I also really don't know the reason.")* and is hard on himself because of his former evasions.

The autobiographical relevance of this self-critical and unfinished assessment is also visible in the fact that it appears in the pre-coda phase of the narrative (Schütze, 1987: 183). A comparative analysis of many autobiographical off-the-cuff narratives has led to the discovery that such pre-coda commentaries, which are marked by conflicting propositions, often reveal the special problems of a narrator with regard to an overall moral consideration and evaluation of her/his own actions and what they convey about her- or himself.

These difficulties are also underlined by the preliminary ending of the narrative *("Aehm, what else can I tell?")*, the "story with Vincent" is not finished yet. The rest of the narrative, which is initiated by the interviewer's question *("How did it go on?"),* is not marked by a tendency to self-accusation anymore.

The narrator's self-accusatory attitude was not reinforced in the discourse of our research workshop. It was possible to elucidate the general character of professional problems and paradoxes in this field of work (cf. the "moral dilemma" mentioned above) and to think about alternative options which the members of the team had not taken into consideration. It was also possible to show respect for the special sensitivity of the narrator and his suffering from – what he considered as – "dirty work" (Hughes, 1984).

4. Concluding Remarks

I have tried to show how future professionals can be encouraged to turn the acquisition of competencies of reconstructive social research into "their own affair" and how such processes can be supervised. It is crucial that students learn to articulate *their own* work experience freely and gain some analytical distance from it. If future professionals get involved with such processes in the context of seminars of practice analysis and research workshops, the following developments can be facilitated:

(1) In learning to listen, to analyze and develop certain writing skills, students may acquire *competencies of a social scientific case analysis* which are fundamental for their future professional work with clients and for a self-conscious and differentiated *written presentation* of their practice and its complexity. I think that the autonomous development of such forms of presentation is of crucial importance in the face of (a) the prevailing forms of "quality assurance" and its rhetoric, which practitioners of social work often accept in a defeatist manner, and (b) their incisive consequences for the adjudication or dispossession of professional esteem. It is important that they find "their own voice".
(2) Students contribute to empirical investigations of professional fields of action in the style of a *"grounded theory"* (Glaser/Strauss 1967). What I have in mind is a kind of research of students "from below" and "in their own affairs" as can be practiced in different fields of professional education and practice – not just in social work but also in teacher trainings etc.
(3) Familiarizing students with such kinds of self-reflection about their own practice might have consequences for developing forms of a *self-critical discourse on professional mistakes* which are characterized by interplay of a certain type of writing and an oral discussion based on it. This would be different from group or team supervisions without competing with such procedures. Speaking of professional practitioners becoming ethnographers of their own affairs (Riemann, 2006) means that something new emerges which is between professional self-critique on the one hand and research on the other hand. But this needs to be supervised if it is to be

preserved. In this regard, forms of further education are interesting (cf. Nittel, 1997) which have developed out of student research workshops in qualitative research.

I have primarily focused on experience in social work education, but I do not have in mind an exclusive social work project. Gaining a new understanding of professional work is facilitated when students do not stew in their own juice, but communicate about qualitative data in research workshops and seminars of practice analysis together with students from other disciplines and professions, and in cooperation with experienced practitioners. This article has shown that qualitative data might be crucial in this context in which parts of the students' own professional practice and their own biographical experience become visible.

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